

GLANCY ARTICOLO DICKENS

INTRODUCTION

A Personal and Beloved Work

Charles Dickens himself called *David Copperfield* his “favourite child,” which suggests a deep bond between the author and the novel. Unlike some of his more overtly socially critical works, *David Copperfield* has a more intimate, nostalgic, and personal tone.

Structure and Style

The novel is written in the first person, which sets it apart from Dickens’s other works and reinforces its autobiographical character. The style combines comic moments with melancholy, characteristic of Dickens’s writing.

Autobiography and Memory

The story is permeated with Dickens’s own memories, particularly of his childhood and youth, with all their hardships and triumphs. The novel resonates with readers not so much for its historical component (as, for example, the Poor Laws in *Oliver Twist*), but for its universal portrayal of the experience of growing up. The death of Dickens’s sister, Fanny, in 1848 may have driven him to revisit his past through the novel.

The Author’s Presence in the Novel

- The character David Copperfield shares Dickens’s initials, but inverted (Charles Dickens → David Copperfield).
- The character Mr. Dick represents another projection of the author, obsessed with the attempt to write yet unable to avoid references to a historical event—namely, the execution of Charles I. This may reflect Dickens’s preoccupation with his own childhood traumas.

In *David Copperfield*, Mr. Dick is eccentric and fixated on writing. However, he has a particular obsession: he cannot help thinking about the severed head of King Charles I (Charles I), an important historical event that occurred in 1649, marking the king’s death. The fact that Mr. Dick keeps thinking about Charles I’s decapitated head while trying to write is symbolic. Dickens, through Mr. Dick’s obsession, references the way Charles I’s figure and fate (decapitation) can continue to haunt an author’s writing or thoughts. Furthermore, 1849—the year Dickens was writing—marked the bicentenary of Charles I’s execution. Thus, Mr. Dick’s fixation is not random; it reflects a connection to history and a meditation on power, death, and historical memory.

At the end of the novel, Dickens felt he had transferred a part of himself into the protagonist, so much so that he described completing the work as sending “a part of myself into the Shadowy World.”

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

1. **The Childhood Trauma Hidden for Years**

In 1847, Dickens first confided to his friend John Forster about the period he spent working at Warren's blacking factory. Until then, he had kept that painful memory secret, considering it a shame.

2. **From an Autobiographical Project to Fiction**

Dickens initially planned to write an autobiography but decided to transform his experience into a novel. His childhood was thus transfigured into David Copperfield's story.

3. **Fidelity to Memories in the Novel**

Some episodes from Dickens's past appear almost word-for-word in the depiction of David's work at the Murdstone and Grinby factory. The sense of abandonment is central both in Dickens's true life and in the novel: Dickens/David feels deprived of adults who look after him.

4. **Denouncing Child Injustice**

As in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens highlights the cruelty of the adult world, which robs children of their childhood. Throughout his writings, he conveys the fear of becoming a "vagabond" or a "little thief" due to adult neglect.

5. **The Character of Mr. Micawber = Dickens's Father**

The comic yet disastrous Mr. Micawber is inspired by Dickens's own father, John Dickens. Like him, he is irresponsible with money, ends up in debtors' prison, yet remains a loving figure. Dickens felt a mixture of affection and irritation toward his father, just as David feels toward Micawber. Despite the difficulties his father caused, Dickens transforms that paternal figure into one of the most memorable comic characters in English literature.

6. **Maria Beadnell → Dora Spenlow**

Dora, David's first love, is inspired by Maria Beadnell, Dickens's youthful sweetheart. A letter from 1855 shows that Dickens was still attached to the memory of that youthful passion. However, the fragility of David's marriage to Dora mirrors Dickens's own marital difficulties with Catherine, his wife.

7. **The Evolution of David (and Dickens) as a Writer**

Like Dickens, David becomes a writer, starting as a stenographer and journalist. The growth of his imagination is crucial: David reads Smollett, Fielding, Defoe, and *The Arabian Nights*, just as Dickens did as a child. Literature becomes their pathway to escape suffering.

8. **Art as Salvation**

Dickens used to tell stories to his fellow workers at the blacking factory, just as David

captivates his schoolmates with his tales. The parallel with Scheherazade (*The Arabian Nights*) emerges: surviving through storytelling.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

Integrated Plot Summary

Narrated in the first person by an adult David Copperfield, the novel recounts his long journey of emotional and personal growth, without relying on sensational plot twists like hidden wills or unknown family secrets, as is common in some of Dickens's other works. From birth—marked by his father's death and the subsequent loss of his mother—David faces trials and sufferings that shape his character.

During childhood, David lives happily with his mother and his nurse Peggotty, until his mother marries the cruel Mr. Murdstone, who, together with his stern sister, dominates and mistreats David. On one of his earliest outings, Peggotty takes David to Yarmouth, where he meets her brother and his adopted children, Ham and Little Em'ly, giving him a glimpse of a different world.

After suffering violence that even prompts him to bite Murdstone's hand, David is sent to school. His education becomes even more arduous: following his mother's death, the Murdstones abandon him and force him to work in a London bottle factory, where he lives with the Micawber family, defined by perpetual financial instability. Feeling cast aside, David resolves to seek out his only living relative: his aunt, Miss Betsey Trotwood, who welcomes him, restores his dignity, and provides him with a proper education.

Indeed, the narrative unfolds through two significant solitary journeys:

- **The first**, from London to Dover, brings David to Betsey Trotwood's refuge, where he begins his transformation from a "wretched boy" to a "gentleman."
- **The second**, undertaken after the death of Dora Spenlow—David's first, ill-fated wife—leads him to Europe in search of inner peace and understanding, a journey that ultimately enables him to recognize the value of true love in Agnes Wickfield.

Simultaneously, the novel explores the dynamics of formative relationships and romantic choices. David's love story is marked first by an innocent, immature affection for Dora, which proves incapable of sustaining shared life, and then by his discovery of a deep bond with Agnes, the "golden thread" representing genuine emotional balance. The tale intertwines with other characters' stories: the enigmatic James Steerforth, whose tragic influence spreads to Little Em'ly and her family, and the sinister Uriah Heep, who, by manipulating Mr. Wickfield, embodies the struggle for power and submission.

Analyzing the plot development reveals that the novel does not rely on dramatic revelations of hidden secrets; rather, it charts a gradual coming-of-age journey. David does not undergo a radical transformation; instead, his mind and heart grow stronger through hardship, disillusionment, and life experiences. Relationships—whether familial, romantic, or friendly—become the soil from which his identity is forged, while figures like Betsey Trotwood and Mr. Micawber stand as models of resilience and justice. In the end, the story closes on a note of balance and rebirth: negative characters face consequences for their actions, while positive characters find peace. David, now a successful writer and mature man, attains his desire to find “true love” beside Agnes, thus completing his long and tumultuous path of growth.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

1. The Theme of Formation and Identity

David Copperfield narrates his own story and, from the outset, wonders whether he will be the true hero of his own life. This reflection introduces the central theme of the novel: personal growth and the construction of identity through experiences, successes, and failures.

2. Maternal Figures and Their Weakness

Clara Copperfield (David’s mother) and Dora Spenlow (his first wife) embody an ideal of fragile, childlike femininity. Both are affectionate and devoted but lack strength and independence. Clara fails as a mother by marrying Murdstone and allowing her son to be mistreated. Dora, too, remains immature and unable to be a true partner for David, whose emotional development surpasses hers. Their deaths are symbolic: unable to grow and face adult life, they vanish.

3. Strong Female Figures: Peggotty and Betsey Trotwood

In contrast to Clara and Dora, Peggotty and Betsey Trotwood are energetic, down-to-earth women. Peggotty, David’s nurse, offers unconditional love and protection. Betsey Trotwood, initially cantankerous and disappointed by the birth of a boy instead of a girl, becomes David’s true guide, providing education and financial stability. Her role is more effective than that of the maternal figures because she is not blinded by maternal indulgence.

4. James Steerforth: The Allure of Corruption

Steerforth is a captivating yet tragic character. Raised by an overprotective mother, he develops a sense of superiority and irresponsibility. Young and vulnerable, David is enthralled by him but eventually realizes Steerforth’s selfish nature. Steerforth represents a corrupt male model, a gentleman devoid of moral values who leads himself and others to ruin.

5. **Uriah Heep: The Power of Falsehood**

If Steerforth is the privileged aristocrat, Uriah Heep embodies the insidious power of hypocrisy. His servile demeanor conceals ruthless ambition, leading him to manipulate the weak Mr. Wickfield for personal gain. His serpentine appearance reflects his slimy, sinister character in quintessential Dickensian style.

6. **The Tyranny of Murdstone and Creakle**

Murdstone (David's stepfather) and Mr. Creakle (the schoolmaster) exemplify abuse of power. Both inflict cruel punishments and seek to crush children's spirits. Dickens aligns them with the rigid Calvinist morality of the era, highlighting how repressive education can destroy individuality.

7. **The Wisdom of Simplicity: Mr. Dick and Peggotty**

Mr. Dick, though mentally fragile, possesses an intuitive wisdom that makes him more perceptive than many other characters. Likewise, Peggotty and her cousin Ham (the honest fisherman) exemplify spontaneous, genuine goodness, opposing the corruption of the elite.

8. **Agnes: Dickens's Ideal Woman**

Agnes Wickfield is David's moral guide—his “good angel”—a model of purity and wisdom. Yet her character can sometimes seem idealized and lacking the depth of other, more multifaceted characters.

THEMES

1. **Formative Relationships and Parental Influence**

The text raises crucial questions: which relationships shape our lives, and how are we influenced by parents who are weak or overbearing? Dickens explores the contrast between adults who, through incompetence or excessive indulgence, fail to impart strength and self-discipline—seen in David's parents, Dora, and Mr. Micawber—and figures who, conversely, foster the formation of an autonomous, resilient mind.

2. **Marriage and Choosing a Partner**

Another central theme concerns choosing a partner and what constitutes a healthy marriage. The novel shows how relationships based on a “willing partnership,” in which both spouses are willing to support each other with strong minds and hearts, can lead to happiness, whereas the absence of such balance leads to dysfunctional marriages and personal ruin.

3. **Power and Submission**

Dickens interrogates the dynamics of power: why do some people seek to dominate others, and what is the effect of such power on the timid or easily influenced? Examples include Uriah Heep's manipulation, Mr. Murdstone's severity, and Steerforth's magnetic

influence, which illustrate the tension between yielding to domination and asserting one's own will and independence.

4. **The “Willing Mind”: A Central Concept**

The concept of the “willing mind” (i.e., a mind that is open or pliable) recurs throughout the novel: it describes a mind that, unless trained and strengthened, can readily succumb to external pressures, as in the cases of David, Dora, and other characters. At the same time, the “willing mind” can also represent the ability to resist pressures and develop an inner strength that allows one to overcome adversity—exemplified by Betsey Trotwood, who urges David to become a “fellow firm,” a resolute, determined, and self-reliant person.

5. **The Legacy of Victorian Ideals**

The novel affirms Victorian ideals such as hard work, honesty, autonomy, and self-discipline—qualities that solidify with age, experience, and wise upbringing. Through characters like Mr. Micawber and the veiled criticism of childish or undisciplined figures (both among parents and youth, like Steerforth), Dickens condemns irresponsibility and the tendency to let inherited weakness destroy the potential for personal growth.

6. **Transformation Through Experience**

Ultimately, David's journey is not a sudden, radical change of heart but a gradual refinement: his soul becomes “disciplined,” and his mind is strengthened through experiences, challenges, and the guidance of positive figures. The narrative emphasizes how overcoming the limits imposed by indulgence and weakness, and acquiring a strong will, are essential to achieving balance between yielding to external influences and asserting one's own independence.

LINGUISTIC STYLE AND TONE

1. **Balance between Exuberance and Seriousness**

David Copperfield's language oscillates between vibrant exuberance and the more serious, declamatory tone of Dickens's novels from the 1850s and '60s, fusing irony, reflection, and humor.

2. **Use of the Present Tense in the “Retrospects”**

David alternates between the present tense and recounting past memories, lending immediacy to the narration and allowing the narrator to distance himself emotionally from the past.

3. **Characterization of the Characters' Speech**

- **Distinctive Dialogues:** Dickens carefully crafts each character's manner of speaking, as evident in Barkis's colorful expressions or Mr. Micawber's prosaic, elaborate letters, which often end with a brusque “in short.”

- **Dialect Representation:** The accurate reproduction of local speech patterns—especially those of Yarmouth characters—enriches the authenticity of the dialogue.
 - 4. **Metaphors and Fairy-Tale Imagery**
 - **Use of Fairy-Tale as Metaphor:** The novel embraces fairy-tale imagery to represent the child's perspective, contrasted with adult reality. This fusion underscores the danger of being dominated by excessive romanticism, as seen in David's infatuations with Dora and Steerforth.
 - **Maritime and Shakespearean Imagery:** References to *The Tempest*—such as the motifs of storm and shipwreck—symbolize the destruction of romantic youth and the birth of new awareness, marked by Steerforth's tragic end and Ham's death.
 - 5. **The Journey from Youth to Adulthood**
 - **Growth and Transformation:** Dickens's literary devices—alternating narrative tenses, rich dialogue, and fairy-tale metaphors—underscore David's maturation. David's transformation, from an idealistic view of youth to a more mature, clear-eyed understanding of reality, is conveyed through these stylistic strategies.
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A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF *DAVID COPPERFIELD*

A psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel, inspired by Freud's theories, views David Copperfield as depicting the protagonist's psychic growth, in which the conflict between the conscious (the Ego) and the unconscious (the Id) is mediated by the Superego as an external moral construct. According to Freud, repressed desires—often sexual in nature, as suggested by the Oedipal complex—manifest in dreams, slips of the tongue, and literary symbols.

In the novel, Dickens employs universal symbols—such as drowning and water—to represent unconscious drives. In this context, David's double emerges as a projection of the Id, that dark, irrational part embodying his deepest desires and fears.

- **Uriah Heep**, for instance, embodies the darker, more depraved side of David's psyche: his presence in David's dreams and his association with sex-related symbols (like water) highlight both repulsion and attraction David feels toward those impulses.
- **James Steerforth** represents a less repulsive but equally dangerous aspect of David's repressed sexual desires, acting as a catalyst for the infatuations and relational dynamics that mark David's development.

The novel, deeply autobiographical, channels Dickens's own unconscious drives: the shift from an almost fairy-tale idealistic vision of childhood to a more mature, disenchanted perception of reality illustrates the process of integrating repressed desires

on the path to psychological autonomy. In this way, *David Copperfield* becomes a profound exploration of the internal forces shaping human character, where overcoming dark impulses and achieving a strong will—recognizable in the contrast between the weak “willing mind” and the one capable of resisting destructive influences—are essential for maturation.

In Freud’s model of the psyche, we find:

- **The Id:** the unconscious and instinctual part containing primitive impulses and desires.
- **The Ego:** the conscious and rational part mediating between the Id’s impulses and reality’s demands.
- **The Superego:** the collection of internalized norms and values functioning as moral conscience.